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#### ABSTRACT

An article and a bibliography constitute this issue of the "Illinois English Bulletin." In "Keep the Natives from Getting Restless," Barry Gadlin examines native language learning by children from infancy through high school and discusses the theories of several authors concerning the teaching of the native language. The "Bibliography of Linguistics and the English Language" by Donald Nemanich lists books under the following headings: Teaching the English Language, General Books about Language, Anthologies, History of the English Language, Specific Topics in English Language History, Historical Linguistics, American English, Dialects, Social Dialects, Sociolinguistics, Usage, Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar, Transformational Grammar (Theory), Transformational Grammar (Textbooks), Stratificational and Tagmemic Grammars, Eclectic Grammars and Surveys of Grammars, Phonology, Stylistics (Linguistic Analysis of Literature), Psycholinguistics and Child Language, Semantics, and Kinesics and Proxemics. (JM)

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# ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

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Keep the Natives from Getting Restless

BARRY GADLIN FOREST VIEW HIGH SCHOOL ARLINGTON HEIGHTS

I wonder if parents should be paid as much as English teachers. This idea may seem absurd or frightening, but in terms of language teaching and in terms of providing a suitable environment for language learning, the parent plays a far more important role than the teacher. M. A. K. Halliday, in his book The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching, points to the importance of family environment for language learning: "The child's first language introductions are from his parents and family. He makes mistakes but corrects them on his own (phonetical, phonological, grammatical, and lexical." Charlton Laird agrees with Halliday's notion of family importance; he also agrees strongly with Halliday's 'self-teaching' theory in infants. Laird traces his granddaughter's language growth and the conditions under which her language growth occurred. Laird begins with the premise that "a vocal, happy household where speaking is fun allows for language learning which is enjoyable." He then follows her language growth process and ends with some meaningful conclusions and a startling suggestion. I am going to discuss Hanna's (his granddaughter's) language learning process along with the author's conclusions and startling suggestion. I begin with Hanna for two reasons: first, so that I might show the changes in the language learning process as the child grows and as she proceeds through school; secondly, so that I might point out the need for different teaching techniques as the child develops.

Laird notices a language growth pattern in Hanna which he felt was typical in most infants. The first understandable sounds a child utters result by direct imitation—that is, the imitation of



a sound directly after hearing it. This situation can be compared to the parakeet owner who spends weeks teaching "Billy Boy" how to say "cracker" or "pretty," Neither the parakeer nor the child knows what he is saving; the reward is the thing, I should mention, however, that the above comparison is only an observable one; a more complex, organized process continues within the child enabling him to develop more difficult language structures. Laird notes the interesting fact that the child would repeat a word only when part of an imperative sentence pattern (e.g. "Say 'kitty,' Hanna" as opposed to "The kitty wants some milk."). During the following months. Hanna learned words necessary for a child's wants--names of family members, names of meals, and names of individual foods. One notes that Hanna's language grasp has grown from direct imitation to remembered sounds. From this stage Hanna develops a capacity to grasp phrases, imitating them with similar atress, pitch, and juncture but often not with identical phonemes. Simple exclamations like "oh-oh" playfully stated by Hanna's mother were easily duplicated by Hanna. However, statements used to describe something, for instance, a merry-go-round, became phonologically mangled. "It goes round and round" became "ronaron." Gradually, Hanna was able to assemble noun-verb combinations as her ear for imitation became sharper and as her vocabulary became larger. If one were to draw up a brief diagram of Hanna's language progress, the diagram would look similar to the following: · in (3)

 $(5) \qquad (5) \qquad (6) \qquad (7) \\ Sound---Imitation---Result----Meaning---Word Combination---Result----Idea$ 

In explanation, a chi-d imitates(2) a sound(1) receiving similar results(3) each time he utters it; from this result he unconsciously learns meaning(4). When his vocabulary and his memory have increased to a certain level, he imitates word combinations (5), even sentence patterns, gradually gaining enough skill and confidence through continuous results and reinforcements(6) to combine his own words into an idea(7).

Laird stresses three important conditions under which language growth occurs to its fullest. First, he restresses that "happiness and playfulness are essential ingredients of language learning." Much learning springs from a cheerful, game-like situation. Secondly, "Hanna did her best learning without help." That is, her parents never consciously taught her sentence structure and vocabulary. And thirdly, Hanna learned most of her language in some kind of context. In other words, Hanna learned language in the process of doing something else.



I idmit being repulsed by a suggestion which Laird makes to increase an individual's language growth during childhood. Since language learning is essentially an intellectual activity except during childhood, he feels, and since a child even unconsciously learns sentence patterns, why could Hanna not have been exposed to more complex sentence patterns so that she would have less trouble learning these patterns in school? This in itself does not seem too unreasonable, for I often must leave the room when I hear parents, cousins, and grandparents talking to a child as if he were a cocker spaniel. I find myself rushing into the kitchen to see where the parents have newspapers spread. However, Laird's idea of how to achieve greater exposure to more complex sentence patterns when an infant reminds me too much of trying to create a super-intellectual race. He suggests that a child should listen to recordings of the Gettysburg Address, Laird presupposes that learning more complex structure is necessary to improve one's eventual level of communication. I am not sure whether Laird is thinking of Hanna's enjoyment although, granted, listening to a tape recorder can be enjoyable.

As I mentioned in my introduction, I am mentioning Hanna to show where the native speaker has been to achieve his nativeness. Since language growth and the elements of vocabulary and sentence structure are so closely tied into experience, one can imagine the various levels of language achievement the teacher must confront by the time these children are of school age. What should a teacher do with the language structure the child brings into the classroom? How applicable in a school situation are Laird's three conclusions—that a child learns language best without help, in context, and in a playful, happy atmosphere? And how should methods of language instruction change, if indeed important, between grade school and high school? In the remainder of this paper, I will present possible answers to these three questions.

Halliday describes three approaches to teach language. The productive approach deals with the teaching of new skills. The prescriptive approach attempts to replace one pattern of language ability already successfully acquired with another pattern. The descriptive approach seeks to demonstrate how language works; it involves talking about skills already acquired without trying to show how these skills are used.

Halliday notes that each of the three approaches implies an answer to the question: "What do we teach the native language for?" The teacher using the productive approach assumes the



philosophy, "I teach English to natives to help extend the use of his native language in the most effective way. This attitude implies that there may not be one effective way of speaking, for the productive approach seeks not to replace one's dialect but only to extend it. The teacher using the prescriptive approach assumes the philosophy. "I am teaching the native language to teach the children to replace those patterns of language activity which are unacceptable with other acceptable patterns. One notes the difference between the productive and prescriptive approaches here; while the productive approach seeks to extend, the prescriptive approach seeks to replace. One sees also in the prescriptive approach a narrower viewpoint toward the acceptability of any dialect other than a standard one found in the classroom texts. The third teacher, the one taking the descriptive approach, assumes the philosophy, "I teach English to native speakers in order to show the child how language works by displaying, ordering, and adding to his use of his native language." Using this philosophy, the teacher seeks to make the student aware of the language system he uses so that he might make other additions to his language growth even outside of the classroom situation. This last point-continuous growth outside of the classroom--is an important advantage. The productive and the prescriptive approaches are more classroom oriented since a teacher is usually needed to help the student substitute or extend language patterns. When one follows the descriptive approach, language growth follows language understanding; this would appear to have more lasting effects on an individual's language process.

I am partial to the descriptive teaching approach, but I do not mean to imply that the other two approaches do not have a place in teaching. When a child enters grade school, he brings with him the vocabulary and word structure he has developed over a five-year period. However, these elements are oral, not written. In this situation a pleasant balance must be achieved, a balance of descriptive language teaching to continue and increase his speaking ability, productive language teaching to introduce the student to a new medium--written language, and prescriptive language teaching to try and substitute more understandable idioms in speaking and writing and to correct certain writing skills the student might have grown into. This last approach might be shunned entirely by the individual arguing strongly for keeping one's dialect and forgetting about a standard dialect. However, I strongly feel the need for some form of communi-



cation, written or spoken, to which all members of a given society can turn in order to exchange ideas. Using this criterion, one eliminates the idea of social snobbishness being attached to a language and instead substitutes social need. Even if standard English becomes a totally pictographic language, this will be something to which all dialects can turn to communicate. Along this line of thinking, a standard spelling and punctuation system should be taught, and no matter how a teacher might attack spelling and punctuation, he will invariably be taking a prescriptive approach when trying to correct letter formation, faulty punctuation habits, and erroneous spelling. Once the individual has a grasp of how to express thought through writing, the prescriptive approach can be tossed aside entirely, and the descriptive approach may assume sole place in written language teaching.

Paula Backscheider, in her article "Punctuation for the Reader," shows how punctuation can be learned through induction and self-prescription. She recommends that for the first few weeks of the semester the teachers merely circle or cross out incorrect uses of punctuation marks. For best results the focus should be on two punctuation marks at a time, say, the apostrophe and the semi-colon. Since writing problems will vary among students, each student might be focusing on a different mark. At the end of a three week period, the student and teacher go over where the punctuation errors occur. The student, after noting where punctuation is needed and/or omitted, assumes the responsibility for formulating his own rules about where certain punctuation marks should go. One student composed the following rule about the apostrophe: "We use it only to show ownership and when letters are left out." One notes that he atrived at this definition on his own through an understanding of certain language patterns.

I would like to evaluate Backscheider's idea by measuring it against the three conditions Laird proposes to insure language growth in an infant. First, Laird proposes that the infant learns best by himself. The student who formulated his own apostrophe definition seems to show that he does indeed learn concepts on his own. The learning he had to accomplish, moreover, can be more difficult than an infant's learning, for the student had to "unlearn" an erroneous language habit. Secondly, Laird proposes that language is best learned in context. Backscheider's approach seems to correlate with Laird here, also. Rather than going over some formal, possibly boring and unrelated exercises,



the student deals with a problem he knows is embedded in his own language structure. He works with words and structures he is familiar with. Laird's third proposal, the essentiality of playfulness and cheerfulness, is dependent upon both the student's and the teacher's attitudes in Backscheider's language activity. The format of her activity, however, certainly makes language learning more enjoyable.

Stanley Bank, in a recent article "Playing with the English Language," enumerates some game playing techniques for teaching language in the high school. Bank bases most of his activities on the philosophy that "most students neither need nor want a system for describing the structure and processes of the language, but that many of them enjoy behaving like linguists on a limited scale, directing their curiosity toward their (own) language."8 Bank calls his classroom language activities "playing" because each activity is the end in itself; each game doesn't seek to approach a description or a development of a language system. In short, the teacher is creating a junior corps of T-G grammarians. Bank's games can be divided into three categories: the unstructured. whenever-it-seems-appropriate games; the planned language games, focusing on literature and writing; and the planned language games, focusing on language itself. The first game may occur while the class is reading any piece of literature, say, Huck Finn. While reading aloud, a student pronounces Cairo (Illinois) as if he were pronouncing Cairo, Egypt. The teacher then might direct the students to think of other pairs of words which are pronounced differently although they look alike: graduate, predicate, progress, Vice (nice), Job (ioh). The second game activity is planned but it operates essentially the same as the first. This type of activity can work within the confines on one short story using an unfamiliar dialect. John Updike uses many words which are understandable vet are of a part of a distinct dialect. The word phosphate in relation to other dialect terms meaning the same item (soda, pop, tonic) can lead the class into a discussion of other geographic or peer group dialects. The third type of game activity focuses on language as language. This game is similar to the first two in that it may use literature as its springboard, but it leaves the context of the literary work, and instead focuses on language as language. For example, after a class has studied a work of literature and has become annoyed because of the number of obsolete words or words whose meanings have changed since the time the work was written, the opportunity may have arrived to gather a small list of words used by the



author and to trace the changes in meaning. Games with word tone may present opportunities for students to turn a science fiction writer into a writer of comedy or romance.

These word games provide another important function. Because one objective of the English teacher should be to teach the individual to communicate effectively with both a standard, written dialect and his own dialect, these games expose him to a number of dialects--his classmates', people living centuries ago, and people living in other regions of the U.S. Seeing how various dialects have grown and are used effectively, the student can observe speech habits other than his own and those shown to him in language texts. Activities like those above aim at eliminating snobbish attitudes toward the standard dialect but do not aim at eliminating a standard dialect.

Using Backscheider and Baker as examples to show what is being done to teach English in the classroom, one sees definite uses for Laird's findings. Laird's conclusions about learning environments for infants have great relevance in setting up a learning environment for any individual. Education's focus on individualized instruction, the elective system, and new reaching approaches are all signs that the schools recognize the need for certain learning environments. In curriculum planning many schools now offer extensive elective programs. Forest View High School in Arlington Heights, Illinois, presents students with more than fifty English courses from which they can choose. The list ranges from Composition Skills to Advanced Placement English, from Oral Communications to Advanced Speech, and from Detective and Science Fiction to Psychological Approaches to Literature. Although the aim of each course is to increase the verbal and written language abilities of the student, the objectives are placed into various contexts so that the student may choose the context in which he will get most enjoyment.

One gains insight from the growth of an infant as to how language should be taught in the classroom. First, as the infant develops, he gathers linguistic information most of which will stay with him for his lifetime. Because of this fact, how advisable would it be to deny this individual the language pattern he has assimilated? The prescriptive approach, then, has little use in the teaching of oral language to a student. And secondly, when one examines the conditions under which the infant learns language best, he finds that these same conditions are extremely useful to lead the student to an awareness of language structureshis own and a standard one. Studying language in a vacuum through drill in a classroom of forty students seems to go against everything Laird found in his studies.



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#### FOOTNOTES

- M. A. K. Halliday, Angus Melntosh, and Peter Strevens, The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 224.
- 2. Charlton Laird, Ind Gladly Teche, (Englewood Clifts, New Jersey: Prenvice Hall, 1970), p. 105.
- 3. Laird, p. 105.
- 4. Laird, p. 106.
- 5. Laird, p. 106.
- 6. Halliday, p. 226.
- 7. Paula Backscheider, "Punctuation for the Reader," English Journal, 61(1972), 876.
- 8. Stanley Bank, "Playing with the English Language," English Journal, 62(1973), 419.

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